

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

THE NEWEST CHAPTER IN COUNTERINSURGENCY
OPERATIONS: DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ
AND THE LEVANT

EXPLORING HOW TO SUCCEED IN LIGHT OF RECENT COUNTERINSURGENCY
OPERATIONS THAT YIELDED LIMITED OR NO SUCCESS



by

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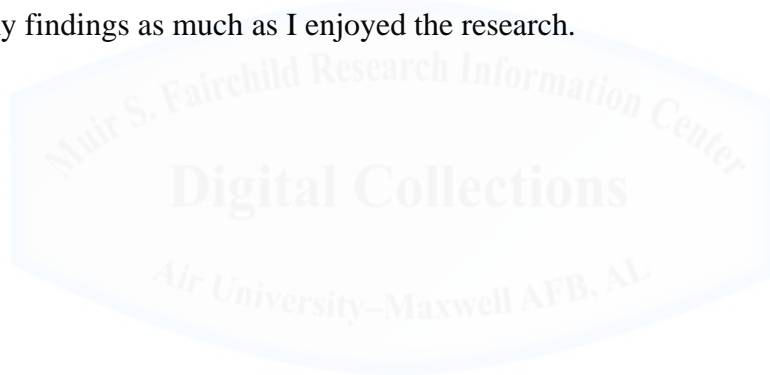
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PREFACE

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife for her support and encouragement through this research project. I would also like to thank my two research advisors, Dr. Gregory Intoccia and Dr. Patricia Lessane for their insightful instruction and direction. This subject is very dear to me as I have served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Having personally flown over 60 missions in the F-15E in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has special meaning to me. I also served a tour on the ground in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom as an Air Liaison Officer. The ground war is such a significant player in counterinsurgency conflicts. I hope you enjoy my findings as much as I enjoyed the research.



Abstract

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has become a serious problem in Iraq and Syria. The radical terrorist group is growing rapidly and causing great instability in the Middle East to which the United States has become heavily involved. The United States has been involved in counterinsurgency operations for the last fifteen years but saw limited and temporal success in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The purpose of this paper is to examine what the United States needs to change about their current strategy in order to permanently defeat ISIL. It follows the problem/solution methodology in order to examine relevant background information, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current U.S. strategy, and present recommendations. The key findings of the analysis include: air power alone cannot win the war; the current security force training plan is not progressing fast enough, and U.S. weapons allocation needs adjustment. This paper offers four major recommendations: an increase to close air support forces, direct weapons support to the Kurds, increasing the security force training rate, and seeking neighboring coalition ground force support. The key to counterinsurgency is producing a stable and secure environment which starts strong security presence.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2014, the United States embarked upon its third counterinsurgency operation since 2001. This intervention is in response to the aggressive acts of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).¹ ISIL is a fast growing, charismatic, wealthy, radical terrorist organization that is causing mayhem and destruction in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria.² Since early 2014, Islamic State-led forces have seized multiple urban centers, massacred civilians and military forces in Syria and Iraq, and violently targeted ethnic and religious minorities. Their tactics and proclaimed Caliphate vision have “drawn the ire” of the international community and thrown the struggling political arenas of Syria and Iraq into utter turmoil.⁴

The then-National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated in September 2014 that the Islamic State “poses a direct and significant threat to us and to Iraqi and Syrian civilians in the region and potentially to us here at home.”⁵ This insurgency is not only destroying stability in the Middle East, it has potential to threaten the United States’ homeland security.

Counterinsurgency is one of the more abstract forms of conflict. The threat is often not as distinguishable as traditional warfare and often the strategic objectives are difficult to identify. Currently, the United States is providing military support to the counterinsurgency in Iraq and Syria primarily in the form of air power under Operation Inherent Resolve.⁶ History has shown that counterinsurgency operations that are primarily militaristic in focus are unsuccessful. In addition, there are multiple complex challenges with this counterinsurgency operation starting with having to engage the insurgency in two countries and coordinate stability operations with

two sovereign governments. The United States has a difficult challenge in engaging and defeating ISIL while promoting stable post-conflict environments in the area of operations.

How must the United States adapt their current strategy against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in order to be successful in light of recent costly counterinsurgency operations that yielded limited success?

The United States must assist creation and promotion of a regional, viable, permanent security force that is able to effectively combat and defeat ISIL, maintain captured territory, and sustain peace in post-conflict operations.

The United States' current strategy is focused heavily on an air campaign to assist indigenous forces that are already in place. There is a small US contingency ground force in Iraq that provides a link between the air campaign and the local ground forces. A combination of military operations and stability operations is a historically proven approach with counterinsurgency operations.⁵ Military operations are needed to defeat the insurgents in the battle arena, but military victories must be accompanied with permanence. Permanent victories are sustained through secure and stable environments.

The marquis of stability is a permanent viable security force, a prerequisite for success in a counterinsurgency. The US has correctly identified the need to train and equip local ground forces in Iraq in Syria in order to bring such a security force into fruition. A stable and sustainable ground presence is necessary to push ISIL out of controlled areas and maintain recaptured ground.⁶ Currently, ISIL is growing in number faster than their forces can be eliminated. A viable local ground force would assist in a slowing down recruitment and give the local populace hope for a stable secure future. The US needs to increase the pace of building and

training indigenous forces so that such a force can be put in place before ISIL grows to a near unsolvable problem.

The current use of an airstrike only strategy is showing limited success.⁷ This is largely due to a limited close air support contingency force on the ground. Combat aircraft need increased enemy and friendly force reporting to correctly distinguish between targets and coalition forces. Increasing the current numbers of U.S. close air contingency forces would increase the effectiveness and employment rate of each sortie, thereby further degrading and destroying the enemy.

The United States must secure the support of neighboring countries in order to secure the borders of Iraq and Syria. Currently, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist group is able to recruit foreign fighters at an alarming rate.⁸ Aside from Iraq and Syria, the countries that are the most threatened by the rapid growth of ISIL are the neighboring countries. For now, the insurgent group primarily uses the neighboring countries for resupply and foreign recruit movement, but it is clear that ISIL does not intend to keep their operations inside the nucleus they have created in Northern Iraq and Eastern Syria.

A strong neighboring country coalition ground force would be effective in militarily defeating the insurgency. Neighboring countries such as Kuwait, Turkey and Iran have fewer logistical challenges in moving large ground forces in and out of the region. Perhaps the largest disadvantage to the U.S. deploying a ground force of our own is the security vacuum created during withdrawal. A security force comprised of neighboring countries would leave less of a vacuum due to the proximity of each countries standing army, where potential re-deployments are less of a logistical challenge.

The research paper will use a problem/solution framework to identify changes needed to the current U.S. strategy against ISIL. It will begin with a summary of counterinsurgency theory and past U.S. counterinsurgency conflicts to include: the Philippine War, the Vietnam War, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. The background will conclude with a summary of ISIL and U.S. strategic overview. Once the background is established, the strengths and weaknesses of the current strategy will be examined focusing on how each strength and weakness affects the United States, the local populations, and degradation to the enemy. The recommendations will present four suggestions that will enhance the current U.S. strategy and efforts in this conflict.

BACKGROUND

Theories on Counterinsurgency

Writing theory on the subject of counterinsurgency has proved challenging for many military strategists. Despite the complexities and nuances created by individual conflicts, counterinsurgency theorists have come to many of the same conclusions throughout warfare history. These conclusions are helpful in understanding how counterinsurgencies have found success or failed in the past. Of note, what has proven true about counterinsurgency over the years, remains relevant to contemporary discussions and conflicts.

One of the first theorists to address the ideology of counterinsurgency was Santa Cruz De Marcenado, a Spanish military officer, diplomat, author, and governor in North Africa during the early 1700s.⁹ Marcenado published eleven volumes on *Military and Political Reflections*, one of which was dedicated to the subject of government suppression of rebellions and insurgencies. Even as early as the 1700s, Marcenado recognized that counterinsurgency was as much about the

population as it was about the defeating the rebellion. He advocated that military defeat would not necessarily lead to a change of heart in the local population and that this population must be given a “stake” in the state building and reformation post-conflict.¹⁰ As early as the eighteenth century, the importance of the population support and stability and the understating of military victory was identified as the key to successful counterinsurgency operations.

David Galula, a scholar and French officer during the Algerian War provided influential insight and theory on counterinsurgency. Galula outlined four principles on counterinsurgency in his book *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Like Marcenado, Galula’s focus was much less on offensive tactics and much more on the population.

His first law states that the support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgent as for the insurgent.¹¹ Galula highlights this principle to military leaders to point out that ground gained against insurgents will only remain ground gained to those who have the support of the population. Popular support begins and ends with the belief that alliance to the counterinsurgency will yield a more secure and stable environment. A counterinsurgency force that maintains the support of the population will be able to defeat insurgents from region to region without have to dedicate large amounts of forces to sustaining security in areas recaptured. In this way, the population acts as a force enabler.

Secondly, he states that support is gained through an active minority.¹² There are three groups that he identified in an insurgency conflict: the active minority in favor of the counterinsurgency, the neutral majority, and the active minority in favor of the insurgency.¹³ Active minorities hold the power to sway the neutral majority against hostile minority opponents. Galula defined the strategic problem for counterinsurgency as follows: “to find the favorable

minority, to organize it in order to mobilize the population against the insurgent minority.”¹⁴

Winning the active minority is quickly followed by the third law which states that support from the population is conditional.¹⁵ The population aligns with the power that demonstrates the most control over their day-to-day life. For this reason Galula states the “counterinsurgent needs a convincing success as early as possible in order to demonstrate that he has the will, the means, and the ability to win.”¹⁶ Military successes do play a significant role in counterinsurgency, especially early in the conflict. Military and security success is a means to gaining a key center of gravity in counterinsurgency, popular support.

Galula’s fourth and final law states that intensity of efforts and vastness of means are essential.¹⁷ This fourth law emphasizes that operations needed to defeat the threat of the insurgent will be intense and lengthy and will require a large contingency of forces and resources.¹⁸ A counterinsurgency is not a conflict for half-hearted commitment or limited involvement.

In 2006, David Petraeus wanted to redefine the way the United States Army thought about war and developed the United States Field Manual FM 3-24 on counterinsurgency operations. In development of the manual, Petraeus did not struggle with identifying whom to fight, but what to fight for. The great historical war theorist Carl von Clausewitz coined the phrase center of gravity to discuss the various centers of an opponent’s power or critical vulnerabilities.¹⁹ Petraeus’ manual is one of the latest publications to view the population as the center of gravity of counterinsurgency operations. To that end, the manual prescribes advanced levels of integration between civilian and military efforts in “supporting the local population and the host nation government.”²⁰

The manual emphasizes the counterinsurgents responsibility for the population's well-being including: security from violence and crime, provision of basic economic needs, maintenance of infrastructure, sustainment of key social and cultural institutions, and other aspects that contribute to a society's basic quality of life.²¹ Petraeus also emphasized interagency coordination stating because of the complex "diplomatic, informational, military, and economic context of an insurgency, there is no way for military leaders to assert command over all elements, nor should they try to do so."²²

The manual addresses counterinsurgency from a wide scope. It stresses the importance of learning and adapting throughout the operation, developing host-nation security forces, leadership ethics, and logistical support for stability operations. The manual was revised in 2013 and relabeled *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*. The new revision redirects strategy to operations in support of a host nation's counterinsurgency rather than direct intervention in a conflict. This new direction supports a "hands off" approach so that the host nation grows and matures in its capability to maintain security inside their borders.

Each of these theorists stresses the great level of importance that should be placed on gaining the trust of the local population. This trust comes from a belief that the counterinsurgency forces offer more stability and security than the insurgent's agenda.

Early United States Led Counterinsurgencies

Counterinsurgency is not new to the United States. In order, to establish patterns of success and failure that the United States has seen in counterinsurgency, it is important to examine historical examples.

In the early twentieth century, the United States embarked on a successful counterinsurgency operation in the Philippines. The First Philippine Republic revolutionary forces declared war on the United States in a quest for Philippine independence. In this three year war, the United States employed a variety of counterinsurgency tactics with a reasonable amount of success.

First, the United States established that the desired end-state was “determined to be a stable peaceful, democratic, independent Philippines.”²³ The focus was not on an overpowering military victory, but on the good of the population long-term. This end-state decision aligns with theorist success recipe for counterinsurgency.

Secondly, the United States military forces exhibited a significant competitive advantage over the insurgents and were able to quickly eliminate threats in isolated regions. These quick decisive victories “pacified regions and kept them peaceful.”²⁴ The local populations of each region quickly gained confidence in the counterinsurgency and the regions were effectively denied to the insurgency.²⁵ The American strategy employed elements of power through diplomatic, legal, informational, military, and economic pressures. The early military success and focus on the population align with Galula’s second and third laws. As the opposition withered, the United States slowly ceded control Filipino military governors.²⁶ In June 1900, President William Howard Taft signed a presidential charter to transition the Philippines from military rule to civilian control.²⁷ This United States led counterinsurgency operation saw sustained success due to the focus on gaining the support of the population through security and stability measures and emphasizing the establishment of Filipino sovereign control.

In 1965, the United States intervened in the Vietnam War to face the robust North

Vietnamese Communist military and the formidable guerilla forces of the Viet Cong. The United States would face “arguably the most complex, effective, lethal insurgency in history.”²⁸ The early strategy of the United States involvement was to focus on the enemy main forces rather than “gear up” for the insurgency type guerilla forces.²⁹ Even though the focus was on the main forces, the guerilla forces had to be dealt with. In 1966, General William C. Westmoreland, the overall commander of U.S. troops under the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), recognized that all “political, military, economic, and security programs must be integrated in order to attain any kind of success.”²⁸ Westmoreland also recognized the need for a war of pacification in addition to a war of attrition. As the allied forces wore down the enemy main forces, the North Vietnamese turned largely to guerilla tactics.³¹

By the time, counterinsurgency efforts were emphasized, there was considerable difficulty in getting the civilian and military mission to mesh.³² The counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam failed in many ways and generated a number of lessons learned. First, unity of effort is vital between military and pacification efforts. Second, an insurgency can thrive if it is allowed to sustain a strong presence among the civilian population.³³ The United States forces were never quite able to target the insurgents in a way that would permanently remove them from the population. Third, a counterinsurgency is not won on the battlefield.³⁴ Westmoreland’s plan was to attrite as many enemy forces as needed to win the war. There needed to be focus on winning the loyalty of the population. Finally, military and civilian leaders in charge of counterinsurgency operations must never forget that the “host nation is responsible for maintaining security and establishing viable institutions that meet the people’s needs.”³⁵ The Vietnam War was costly and largely a failure. The focus on military victory never fused or progressed into the creation of a secure stable environment where the population was able to gain

trust and confidence in the counterinsurgency effort.

These early U.S. counterinsurgencies saw success and failure. The result of the Philippine War and the Vietnam War hinged upon the same axis, the population's confidence. Pursuit or the lack pursuit of this center of gravity proved to be key in each conflict's outcome.

Operation Enduring Freedom

Operation Enduring Freedom is a contemporary and ongoing counterinsurgency. Contemporary counterinsurgencies hold special significance to today's conflicts because the military and civilian agencies tactics and capabilities are more relevant. This section of the paper will detail a brief history of Operation Enduring Freedom followed by an examination of key findings.

After the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, President George Bush made demands on the Taliban organization located in Afghanistan. The demands included that the Taliban deliver Osama Bin Laden, cease harboring Al Qaeda, and shut down terrorist bases and operations in Afghanistan.³⁶ The Taliban refused to hand over Bin Laden, stating that evidence was lacking in connecting him to the September 11 attacks.

After the Taliban refused to meet the demands, a contingency force of Special Forces and combat controllers were airlifted into Afghanistan to join up with the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban Afghan militia, to engage in military operations against the Taliban to quickly remove the Taliban regime.³⁷ By December, the International Security Assistance Force was authorized by the United Nations to conduct security operations in and around major Afghan cities. The nation of Afghanistan saw decreased violence over the next few years as the Taliban retreated

and regrouped. In 2003, Mullah Omar redefined the Taliban organization, establishing himself as the leader and re-launching the insurgency.

The insurgency continued to grow over the next few years as the Taliban recruited forces out of Pakistan training guerilla war fighters to build improvised explosive device, become suicide bombers, plan complex ambushes, and hit-and-run tactics. As the Taliban guerilla operations increased, so did the influx of ISAF troops. In 2010, the United States surged 33,000 additional troops at the order of President Barack Obama.³⁸

The surge, however, was not properly coordinated with or agreed upon by the Afghan government. The continuous resupply of Taliban forces from Pakistan training bases, strategic stalemate and high cost of deployment catalyzed a drawdown of U.S forces in 2013. By the end of 2014 combat operations in Afghanistan were declared complete and NATO began a security assist operation in attempt to transfer combat missions entirely to the Afghan forces by 2015.

The success or lack of success of the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan hinged upon three factors. First and foremost, the United States and other international actors needed to build competent and legitimate Afghan security forces.³⁹ This was especially a failure in the early stages of the counterinsurgency. When the Taliban were overthrown in the early 2000's, the Afghan police were "corrupt, incompetent, under sourced, and often loyal to local commanders rather than the central government."⁴⁰ Significant reforms were made to the police training program in 2005, but many view this as too little done too late.

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especially a failure in the early stages of the counterinsurgency. When the Taliban were overthrown in the early 2000's, the Afghan police were "corrupt, incompetent, under sourced, and often loyal to local commanders rather than the central government."⁴² A lack of a viable police force throughout the country allowed the Taliban to rebuild, dragging out the duration of the insurgency. Significant reforms were made to the police training program in 2005, but many view this as too little done too late.⁴³

Second, the United States needed to increase the quality of the local government throughout the country of Afghanistan, but especially in the rural areas. Research accomplished in the field "in the east and south showed that development and reconstruction did not reach most rural areas because of deteriorating security environment."⁴² Unfortunately, the rural areas that were under the most risk for Taliban operations received the least assistance.⁴⁴ International actors with efforts in Afghanistan needed to win in the Taliban's haven. The counterinsurgency needed to find a way to establish stable governing in the rural areas regardless of security concerns.

Third, insurgent support bases and activities in Pakistan needed be eliminated. In every Afghanistan insurgency since 1979, insurgents have "enjoyed a sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Balochistan Province" in Pakistan.⁴⁵ From these locations, the Taliban are able ship arms, ammunition, supplies, and trainees into Afghanistan unimpeded by counterinsurgency forces. As long as the insurgency is receiving reinforcements and resupplies from across borders, they will be near impossible to cripple or permanently defeat.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) is also contemporary U.S. led counterinsurgency than

existed alongside the war in Afghanistan, albeit different campaigns. Operation Iraqi Freedom's significance lies not only in its modernity, but in its location. A historical foundational understanding of OIF in many ways provides the back story for the rise of ISIL. This section of the paper will present a brief historical synopsis of OIF, followed by key findings of the conflict.

The Iraq War began in March 2003 in an effort to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime for evidences of weapons of mass destruction acquisition, in addition to harboring and supporting the Al Qaeda terrorist group. The Iraqi forces were quickly defeated, the government collapsed, and Saddam was captured by December 2003. A collapsed government and defeated army created a power vacuum that set the stage for widespread violence between the Shias and Sunnis. The United States began an occupation in the country of Iraq that would last the next eight years. A "botched" occupation and a "power vacuum" created by the overthrowing of the Iraqi government brought sectarian violence between the Shi'a and Sunnis and "civil war."⁴⁶

From 2003 to 2007, there were "no security forces capable of maintain law and order and the Americans were not trying."⁴⁷ The Sunnis then embarked in an "armed effort" to drive the American forces out of the country.⁴⁸ In 2007, the United States began a surge campaign in which 30,000 additional troops would be deployed in effort to quell the violence and establish security.⁴⁸ The surge, in addition to Iraqi Security Force and government reform, greatly reduced the violence. The United States began a drawdown of troops in 2009 that was completed by December of 2011. Soon after the completion of the troop withdrawal, security in Iraq began to erode, violence broke out, and the insurgency reemerged. The failure of sustained success in Iraq hinged on three factors.

First, the United States turned their focus to security of the population too late. With the

first four years of the war lacking security efforts, the insurgency and sectarian violence grew to a state of out of control.⁴⁹ Had security been the focus from the outset of ousting the Saddam Regime, the violence and civil war would have been much smaller problems to solve by 2007. Additionally, there was little trust by the Iraqi population in the Iraqi army, Special Forces, and police organizations collectively known as the Iraqi Security Forces.⁵⁰ These programs were not reformed until 2008 when the United States began to make efforts to remove corruption and incompetency from the Iraqi ranks.⁵¹

Secondly, there were many mistakes made in Iraqi government reform. Initially, there was a power sharing agreement among the Sunni, Shi's and the Kurds that was supposed to be an enduring political settlement.⁵² The United States then tried to implement a democracy in 2004 and 2005. Corruption in the elections and a lack of participation by the Sunnis led to a Shi'a militia led government.⁵³ The Shi'a continued to gain power until the combined security forces secured the population from Shi'a militia control and new elections were held in 2009. A more stable government with less corruption was established only two years before complete American withdrawal.

Finally, because of the delays in establishing reform in security and government, the withdrawal of American troops in 2011 was too soon. The stable environment was not established long enough to gain momentum and promote sustained success. The withdrawal created a power vacuum in Iraq.⁵⁴ Security conditions rapidly deteriorated and violence returned.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

When assessing a conflict, it is of paramount importance to understand the threat or enemy. Key elements to understanding an enemy include: origin, core beliefs, agendas, and

military strength. This section of the paper will provide a brief summary of who ISIL is.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is a “transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013.”⁵⁵ The group was derived out of the insurgency that battled U.S. and Iraqi security forces in the Iraq war.⁵⁶ ISIL’s “ideological and organizational roots” evolved from the Al Qaeda forces led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 to 2006.⁵⁷ The group is a product of insurgent reorganizational efforts in Iraq and Syria following the death of al Zarqawi from a U.S. air strike in 2006. In 2013, al Baghdadi merged his forces in Iraq with the forces in Syria and began a series of deadly attacks in the region.⁵⁸ As they have matured and grown in numbers, they have denounced their Al Qaeda roots, viewing themselves as “a state and a sovereign political entity.”⁵⁹

ISIL claims to be the “Sunni Caliphate,” or political and religious successors to the Islamic prophet Mohammad, an idea that was conceived around the events that surrounded Mohammed’s death and funeral.⁶⁰ The Sunni Caliphate understanding holds that the Islamic ruler should show direct inherited succession from the prophet Mohammed and as such holds temporal spiritual authority.⁶¹ ISIL places this Caliphate rule in the hands of its leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.⁶² The ideology of a Caliphate drives ISIL’s purpose, which is to create an Islamic State that encompasses Muslims worldwide, starting with the Middle East.⁶³ The religious radicalism and proclamation of a return to purist Islam practices have made the group extraordinarily charismatic and convincing to their recruits. Because they believe they are the rebirth of true Islam, ISIL is completely intolerant of all other religions and sects of Islam that differ from Sunni. This thought process prompts them to persecute and destroy all perceived heretics.

In September 2014, ISIL was estimated to be comprised of approximately 20,000 to 31,500 individuals and growing at a staggering rate.⁶⁴ Foreign fighters provide the fastest growth source for the terrorist organization, as sources show that since 2014 approximately 15,000 fighters have travelled to Syria from over 80 countries.⁶⁵

ISIL is a formidable military force that is growing quickly with intentions of expansionism. As an insurgency, they are not content to hold the ground that they have captured in Northern Iraq and the Levant region of Syria. Addressing this threat has become of paramount importance in the Middle East.

The Situation in Iraq

Because ISIL is embedded in the countries of Iraq and Syria, it is important to understand the different challenges and nuances that each country presents. In this section, ISIL's activity and opposition in Iraq will be addressed.

Initially assessments at the beginning of the ISIL insurgency in Iraq were that the Iraqi government would be able to contain the group's advances. These assessments were quickly dispelled when the Islamic State captured Mosul and advanced on Tikrit.⁶⁶ Along the way, the group continued to gain momentum in resources and recruits as they freed prisoners, looted banks, and captured a over \$27 billion in U.S. supplied military equipment.⁶⁷ Almost overnight, ISIL became a large well equipped motivated force in Iraq.

Opposition forces to ISIL in Iraq are diverse. The Iraqi Army, backed by the Iraqi government and largely equipped by the U.S., is the primary opposition force.⁶⁸ Even though the Iraqi Army is an established large force; they have struggled against ISIL, losing large cities such

as Mosul and Ramadi.⁶⁹ Additionally, there are several militias at play. The Kurds, an Islamic ethnic group in Northern Iraq, have battled ISIL in the form of the Peshmerga Militia. The Peshmerga have seen some success in recapturing the oil fields of Kirkuk, which has reduced revenue sources to the Islamic State.⁷⁰ Shiite militias have also formed in an around the city of Baghdad in order to assist the Iraqi Army in protecting Iraq's capital.⁷¹

The Iraqi government recently went through major reform. On April 30, 2014, elections for the Iraqi Council of Representatives marking the beginning processes of a new government.⁷² The government reform was designed to better represent the three major tribes in Iraq. The Council of Representatives speakership is held by a Sunni, the ceremonial presidency is Kurdish, and the executive Prime Minister is a Shiite Arab.⁷³ With more equal representation among the major tribes, the hope is to evenly distribute the power and better meet the needs of the diverse Iraqi population.

The Iraqi government offers more stability and equality than the Syrian government. This stability is diametrically opposed by the volatile security situation created by the ISIL's concentrated military efforts in Iraq and the lack of success by Iraqi security forces.

The Situation in Syria

The situation in Syria presents a unique set of challenges compared to the situation in Iraq. Syria has been engaged in a bitter civil war since 2011 between the Ba'athist regime and revolutionary forces such as the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary Opposition Forces (SNCROF) and the Assistance Front for the People of Syria.⁷⁴ The revolutionary forces primary focus is on ousting the regime's president, Bashar al-Assad.⁷⁵ With the regime focusing its efforts against the revolutionary forces, it has paid little attention to the growth of the Islamic

State in Syria.

ISIL is using Syria as a “staging ground” for attacks in Iraq and as a “parallel theater” of operations.⁷⁶ Currently, ISIL fighters have established control of many areas in Northeastern Syria to include control over numerous oil fields used generate revenue for the terrorist group.⁷⁷ In September 2014, ISIL began a siege of the northern border town of Kobane as a strategic move build a gateway for foreign fighters out of Turkey.⁷⁸ The border town became a focal point for U.S. airstrikes as the U.S. paired with Kurdish militia ground forces known as the People’s Protection Units.⁷⁹ The Kurdish militia, whose focus is regaining security, are the ISIL’s primary opposition in Syria.

United States strategy against ISIL

On September 10, 2014, United States President Barack Obama formulated a strategy in a speech, detailing his a desire for the United States to “lead a multilateral coalition to try to degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State.⁸⁰ The United States’ intent in this engagement is to serve in a supportive role surrounded by a team of nations with a singular focus against the terrorist group.

Air strikes have been the primary offensive combat contribution of the United States in the war against the Islamic State. President Obama stated in his speech that these strikes are to “go beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions so that we’re hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on the offensive.”⁸¹ General Ray Odierno, the US Army Chief of Staff and a former top commander in Iraq, states the goal is that these airstrikes will give the Iraqi military time to increase its size and capabilities.⁸² The air strikes have been used to damage and destroy oil refineries, weapons storage facilities, communication centers, fighting positions, and

vehicles in effort to soften the enemy and prepare the way for friendly forces victory.⁸³

The United States strategy against ISIL includes providing support to Iraq and Kurdish ISIL opposition forces. This element of the strategy includes several facets. First, the U.S. is providing a small number of forces on the ground to advise Iraqi security forces, provide close-air support capabilities, secure the U.S. embassy, and operate surveillance assets.⁸⁴ Secondly, the United States is heavily involve in supplying both the Iraqi security forces and the militias with weapons and military vehicles in order to increase the competitive advantage of the local ground forces.⁸⁵ Thirdly, the United States is committed to building and training a more capable local security force. On November 2014, President Obama sent 1,500 U.S. troops to begin training Iraqi army soldiers and militia fighters to fight ISIS on the ground.⁸⁶ An additional 3,000 American troops were deployed to work at four training centers, helping recruit soldiers for the Iraqi Army by providing training, supplies and help with strategy and logistics.⁸⁷

Syria presents a slightly different challenge than Iraq in terms of strategy. Because of the different relationship that the United States has with the Syrian regime compared to the Iraqi government, U.S. ground troops are not desired. On September 5, 2014, President Obama stated that the United States would not be placing ground troops in Syria as he didn't believe that it was necessary to meet strategic goals.⁸⁸ He went on to emphasized the need to find "effective partners on the ground to push back against ISIL."⁸⁹ Thus far, this partnership with forces in Syria has taken the shape of funding and training Syrian Kurdish militias.

ANALYZING THE UNITED STATES STRATEGY

The Strengths of the Strategy

The strategy adopted by the United States to degrade and defeat ISIL has merit. Strength and merit of a strategy are measured against the intended result. In the war against ISIL, the United States' strategy effectiveness is measured in impact to the enemy, stability to the population, and commitment and cost to the United States. The following section will examine the effectiveness of air strike strategy and the training/equipping of anti-ISIL security and militia forces.

The adoption of the air strike only combat strategy is in response to President Obama's declaration that there will be no ground force deployments in the efforts against ISIL. This tactic allows the United States to maintain a limited involvement in the crisis. This strategy stands in stark contrast to the strategies adopted in the Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. From September 2001 to December 2011, over 1.5 million U.S. troops rotated in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹⁰ By 2011, roughly 73 percent of active duty soldiers had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. These large numbers of the U.S. ground forces, created highly involved and complex deployments, occupations, and troop withdrawals. Limited involvement is an advantage to the United States in terms of lowering military commitment and increasing opportunities to grow in readiness for future conflicts.⁹¹

Air strikes are proving to be effective in degrading ISIL in both Syria and Iraq. As of February 4, 2015, CENTCOM reported that 4,817 ISIL related targets had been struck by fighter and bomber type aircraft.⁹² Figure XX breaks down this number into four categories: buildings, vehicles and weapon systems, troops, and other targets. Roughly two-thirds of the targets consist of troops or vehicles. The U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken reported that as of June 2015, the U.S. led coalition against ISIS had recorded more than 10,000 ISIS deaths as a result of

the campaign.⁹³ With the CIA reporting a total ISIS force of 30,000 strong, the 10,000 death claim showing up to a 25 percent reduction in total enemy forces. The 1,477 strikes on vehicles and weapons have destroyed the large number of armored carriers and heavy weapon assets that ISIL had captured in 2014.⁹⁴ The significant losses to man power and vehicles have degraded ISILs offensive capabilities, making them a much more manageable force for security forces and militias to combat.

The United States use of air power lowers the threat to U.S. forces. From 2003 to 2011, the U.S. lost over 4,000 troops in combat in the Iraq War, including over 400 in the first year of the war and over 900 during the first year of the surge.⁹⁵ By contrast, the U.S. has 7 casualties since 2014 in Iraq in the conflict against ISIL.⁹⁶ In terms of risk to our won troops, the air war strategy holds a significant advantage over the ground force deployments of the Iraq war. There are claims that ISIL has the ability to target aircraft with surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery.⁹⁷ These capabilities have proved to be quite limited in number and ability to target U.S. aircraft.⁹⁸ As long as fighter and bomber assets are able to transit in and out of Iraq and Syria from nearby coalition locations, the United States will continue to enjoy reduced risks to soldiers and airmen.

Financially, the war against ISIL pales in comparison to financial investment that the counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan. International Business Times reported in June 2015 that the United States daily financial investment for the conflict against ISIL totals around \$9 million.⁹⁹ By contrast, the war in Afghanistan averaged over \$218 million per day.¹⁰⁰ Conflicts that are expensive to maintain are difficult to sustain. Cutting the cost through an air strike strategy creates an opportunity for the United States to sustain operations with fewer consequences on the defense budget.

Avoiding a large ground force deployment against ISIL greatly reduces the chance of creating a post-conflict security vacuum. The withdrawal of U.S. forces in Iraq in 2011 created a security vacuum that was instrumental to the rise of ISIL.¹⁰¹ The Iraqi forces were accustomed to the backing of the large amount of U.S. forces occupying key locations in Iraq. When the United States withdrew, the Iraqi Forces quickly found they were not strong enough or prepared enough to maintain the security established by the U.S. occupation.¹⁰² Adopting an air strike support strategy encourages the Iraqi security forces to establish their own security and limits negative effects like withdrawal vacuums during post-conflict operations.

The support and training of security and militia forces that oppose ISIL also has its share of merit and advantage. First, the United States support has increased the capabilities of the forces on the ground. Long range and heavy weaponry supplied to Iraqi Security Forces and more recently, the Peshmerga have increased the fighting capacity of anti-ISIL forces.¹⁰³ U.S. supplied weapons and vehicles, issued through the Iraqi government, were critical to the victory of the Peshmerga in recapturing Sinjar Mountain, a key piece of terrain in Iraq that ISIL had devastated and persecuted the Yazidi ethnic group.¹⁰⁴ A military competitive edge or advantage in terms of weaponry or mobility increases the effectiveness of local security forces.

The “advise and assist” teams in Iraq present a several advantages. These teams largely fall into two categories. The first category is tasked with building a more capable and effective Iraqi Security Force.¹⁰⁵ The positive end result of U.S. trained security forces is a corruption free, tactically proficient force that can maintain security post-conflict. The second category is in Iraq to provide a liaison between the ground forces and the air support.¹⁰⁶ There are a number of joint terminal attack controller teams deployed into Iraq to facilitate close air support operations.¹⁰⁷ These teams coordinate with the Iraqi Security Force and Peshmerga movements in order to de-

conflict friendly troop locations with ISIL reports and identify targets of opportunity. In addition to the close-air support experts, there are intelligence reporting experts in place to analyze and report data obtained from intelligence collecting assets located in Iraq.¹⁰⁸ The strength of this second category is tied to increasing the effectiveness of the air strike strategy. Both the joint terminal attack controller teams and the intelligence teams are built to increase accurate timely target data to degrade and destroy ISIL.

The Weaknesses of the Strategy

Now that the strengths of the United States' strategy against ISIL has been examined, the paper turns to an assessment of weaknesses. The weaknesses of the strategy will be assessed in the key factors of impact to the enemy, impact on the local population, and the commitment of the United States. Airstrikes and support/training of local forces remain the two strategic focuses for the purpose assessment.

Airstrikes by themselves lead to limited effectiveness. The air strikes in both OIF and OEF were supportive in driving back the enemy, but it was ultimately the ground presence that was the primary actor in establishing security. The age of modern warfare preaches the success of combined effects on today's battlefield.¹⁰⁹ Attacking a complex enemy such as ISIL with a largely one dimensional tactic leads to a result that retired Lieutenant General David Deptula described at a hearing on Capitol Hill in June, 2015, as "anemic."¹¹⁰ Deptula went on to say that the airstrike strategy placed U.S. commanders in an "untenable situation" and described the current progress as "not unlike" the stalemate and failure of the strategy employed in Vietnam.¹¹¹ The Vietnam strategy struggled with maintaining ground captured or won due to the inability to hold that ground and continue on the offensive.¹¹² Much in the same way, airstrikes as a strategy

in isolation from other domains of war yield reasonably effective offensive short term results, but lack in long term effectiveness. Destroying an enemy stronghold in a hostile town helps with the immediate problem, much like the treating of a symptom of an illness. David Schenker, director of the program on Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, went on record stating, “We have not ostensibly degraded the capability of the organization – we have put them on notice that we will target them, but we have not prevented the movement or the offensive of ISIL.”¹¹³ Treating symptoms provide immediate relief without addressing a cure for the illness.

The airstrike only strategy poses significant challenges with communications between friendly ground forces and the combat aircraft. Typically, warfare in this fashion is characterized as close air support, in which a high level of coordination is required to effectively target the enemy while avoiding friendly fire mishaps. John Keane, a retired Army General and former vice chief of staff described the war on ISIL as “largely close combat, urban warfare” that demands bombs be guided from “our airplanes to the ground by people on the ground”¹¹⁴ He further stated that due to the limited capacity to operate a close air support war that “seventy-five percent of the sorties” from attack aircraft come back without dropping bombs, mostly because they cannot “acquire the target or properly identify the target.”¹¹⁵ While there are a limited number of U.S. Joint Terminal Attack Controllers currently located in Iraq as advise and assist teams who facilitate close air support operations, there are not enough to match the battle rhythm of ISIL.

The airstrike strategy promotes a lack of involvement with the local population, which is a decided disadvantage in a counterinsurgency. As noted in the background section of this paper, the confidence and allegiance of the people is key in defeating an insurgency. David Phillips, the director of Peace Building and Rights Program at Columbia University points out that the United States administration knows that airstrikes alone will not succeed in degrading ISIL.¹¹⁶ He

continues by stating that “degrading and destroying cannot happen unless you are killing ISIL on the ground.”¹¹⁷ Phillips is emphasizing the ground war because victories on the ground instill confidence in the local population and wins over the active majority.¹¹⁸ A confident local population will be more likely to resist the insurgency and side with the counterinsurgency.¹¹⁹ The airstrikes do assist the Iraqi Security Forces and militias, but do little for increasing the confidence of the local population.

The weakness of the United States’ strategy to support, advise and assist Iraqi Security Forces and militias is the rate or aggressiveness of the strategies’ execution. In effort to create a viable security force to combat ISIL, the U.S. began a program to train up to 5,400 fighters a year.¹²⁰ General Lloyd Austin, the top American commander in the Middle East, stated at a Senate hearing in September 2015 that the program was significantly behind schedule and that many of the fighters that had graduated the initial classes had been killed in combat.¹²¹ The effort to use local ground forces in Syria and Iraq has largely had limited success due to the lack of training, overall numbers, and weapon shortage. To date, roughly 120 fighters have graduated the training program.¹²² The U.S. strategy was built with a forecast of 15,000 fighters within three years of the programs start date.¹²³ A large capable ground force is required in order to defeat ISIL. The training program must greatly increase fighter output in order to combat a rapidly growing terrorist organization.

The distribution of arms in Iraq is a weakness of the U.S. strategy to assist security forces in Iraq. Pentagon spokeswoman U.S. Navy Commander Elissa Smith stated that current U.S. policy “remains that all arms transfers must be coordinated via the central sovereign government of Iraq.”¹²⁴ This means that The Kurds, who have proven themselves as the most dedicated and combat worthy unit confronting ISIL, must coordinate all U.S. weapons acquisitions through the

Iraqi government.¹²⁵ Thus far, the Iraqi government has been hesitant to equip the Kurds for fear that the Kurdish Republic will use their strong army to separate themselves from Iraq and form their own state.¹²⁶ As a result, the most effective security force against ISIL is receiving the least amount of aid from the United States. This strategical weakness affects cost to the United States and the local population. In terms of cost, the United States is not receiving the maximum benefit from their weapons investment. In terms of local population, the security force with the most resolve is being limited, leaving the population with a less secure environment.

A weak security force primarily effects the population. As shown historically and theoretically, in counterinsurgency the population is a key center of gravity. Gaining the confidence and trust of the population by creating a secure environment severely limits the insurgent's ability to recruit and resupply.

The question of U.S. ground force deployment

Plaguing defense analyst and politicians is the question to deploy a large U.S. ground force or not. Both OIF and OEF saw large numbers of U.S. troops deployed in and out of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The air strike strategy has been effective to some degree in degrading ISIL, but has reached a stalemate in offensive progression. This section of the paper will examine the reasons the United States should or should not embark on such a deployment.

A large U.S. ground force deployment to Iraq would certainly assist in remedying the security problem in Iraq. ISIL is continuing to grow at an alarming rate while the training of local forces is well behind timeline. In the same time that the United States has trained 500 fighters, ISIL has moved over 20,000 foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq.¹²⁷ The occupation of Iraq by U.S. troops in OIF was effective in creating a secure environment during the time of

occupation. Deploying 10,000 to 25,000 U.S. troops to the region helps to quickly match the enemy's strength and assist in creating a military competitive advantage on the battlefield, thereby increasing security and stability in the region.

There are two primary reasons to avoid a large U.S. ground force deployment. The first, was stated by President Obama before Congress in February 2015. He declared that deploying a large U.S. ground force was not in our national security interests.¹²⁸ With the U.S. military still on the recovery from being overtasked with OIF and OEF, another deployment would further undermine readiness and national security.¹²⁹

The second, and probably the more important reason to not deploy a large U.S. ground force relates to the security vacuum created during the withdrawal from Iraq in OIF.¹³⁰ The security environment rapidly deteriorated following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011.¹³¹ The Iraqi Security forces had become increasingly reliant on the U.S. to maintain security during the last half of OIF and failed to establish strong sustainable security measures of their own.¹³² There is little reason to assume a security vacuum would not reoccur should the U.S. deploy a large ground force again. It is necessary for the region to organically develop a sustainable permanent security force in order to avoid this problem again.

While deploying a large ground force would initially solve the security problem in Iraq, the issues of national security degradation and potential security vacuums point to avoiding this course of action.

Recommendations

The strengths and weaknesses of the United States' current strategy against ISIL and the

avoidance of deploying a large U.S. ground force, births four recommendations to increase effectiveness in this counterinsurgency conflict. The strengths of the current strategy are impactful enough not to merit complete overhaul. Specific changes however, are needed to defeat ISIL.

First, the United States needs to increase the number of U.S. close air support ground forces. This would equate to deploying a covert tactical air control team every 100 square miles (effective air-to-ground communication range) where concentrations of enemy activity are the highest. These teams would co-operate with friendly forces to coordinate airstrikes that align with ground force offensive strategies. The airstrike only strategy is degrading ISIL, but not with effectiveness that will ultimately defeat ISIL. Increasing the number of U.S. close air support ground forces would allow for better enemy and friendly forces de-confliction and increase target nomination for the airborne combat aircraft. Increasing the number of close air support ground forces would allow the United States to maintain the intent of the “no large ground force deployments” ideology, while maximizing the effectiveness of the airstrike only strategy.

Secondly, the United States must find a way to increase weapon support to the Kurdish forces. The Kurds are the most effective security force in Iraq and Syria. Their effectiveness is capped, however, due to the limited supply of weapons they receive. ISIL is a well-equipped force with advanced weaponry for insurgency forces. If the Kurds are to continue to have success against ISIL, they must be able to match them on the battlefield. Counterinsurgency conflict success hinges on early success against the insurgent forces. The Iraqi government is slowing resupply to the Kurds out of fear of future sectarianism in the country. The immediate problem is ISIL and the most effective counterinsurgency forces must be bolstered to continue success on the battlefield. Securing ground with the Kurds will increase the confidence of the local

population and remove the population as one of ISIL's centers of gravity.

Third, the United States must increase the rate training of local security forces. A war fought primarily with air strikes will not win the day in isolation from the other domains. The ground force surge of 20,000 troops in 2007 is ultimately the reason security was established and maintained through December 2011.¹³³ As early as five months after the surge, violence dropped to its lowest level since the beginning of the U.S. invasion in 2003.¹³⁴ While airstrikes did play a role in the establishment of security in OIF, the ground forces were the primary actor. A viable permanent security force is mandatory in order to restore peace in Iraq and Syria. The goal of a U.S. trained security force 15,000 strong in three years was lofty, but necessary. If the United States is to avoid sending troops to bolster security and stability, they must refocus efforts to create this security force locally. A local U.S. trained permanent security force offers a solution that not only eliminates the need for U.S. ground force deployments; it mitigates the potential for a security vacuum at the end of the conflict. Initial failures and slow progress need not deter this key strategic element. Increased funding and trainer numbers are the first steps to seeing success.

Finally, the United States needs to continue to seek support from neighboring coalition forces. The security force U.S. training program is necessary, but will take time. From July to September 2015, ISIL attacks have increased as much as 42% over the previous quarter.¹³⁵ Increased enemy numbers and activity point to a need for increased security forces now. Turkey has thus far been reluctant to dedicate military action against ISIL, but their participation in the ground war could "tip the balance" in the battle against the militants.¹³⁶ A neighboring country's support would create a quick and logistically simple solution for ground force numbers while still avoiding the vacuum that could be created by occupation withdrawals. A synchronized effort between the Iraqi Security Forces, the Kurdish militias, and neighboring

coalition ground forces could emulate the surge tactics of OIF and quickly restore security. The insurgents would be more reluctant to rise up again if neighboring countries were involved in their demise due to the ease of redeployment in the case of post-conflict uprisings.

Conclusion

This paper asked the question: “How must the United States adapt their current strategy against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in order to be successful in light of recent costly counterinsurgency operations that yielded limited success?” The ability to defeat ISIL lies in creating a viable ground security force. Past U.S. led counterinsurgencies have provided enough data points to show that U.S. security troops provide a short-term security solution, but fail at long-term more permanent security.

The United States is content to provide combat air power to support the ground forces in opposition to ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This combat air power needs to be bolstered with increased close air support ground teams. In order to avoid U.S. ground troop deployments and still see success, a viable permanent security force must be created. The current local security forces need increased weapons allocation support and combat training to increase their effectiveness against the enemy. Finally, neighboring coalition countries need to augment local forces with a surge of ground troops in order to quickly regain and maintain security in Iraq and Syria.

Notes

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

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